A Faulknerian portrait of small-town tragedies

When the war is over

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Josef Škvorecký

ORDINARY LIVES

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A street in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, decorated with Nazi flags in 1939

One late summer morning, when I was four years old, my father stooped to pick me up on a lonely road, not far from Náchod, Czechoslovakia, and tenderly placed me in the arms of a Soviet corporal who sat astride the tank that blocked our path. I can still taste the bitter chocolate the soldier handed me, still see my father in his bleached white shirt, his sleeves rolled halfway up his forearms, sipping vodka and feigning interest in the captain's snapshots of his wife, taken maybe a thousand miles away.

My father had no time for Communism. His sister, Hannah, had been taken from their remote mountain village, at the age of twenty-one, to spend eleven years in a Gulag – a slave in a salt mine. Her crime? Being young enough to work. The Communists confiscated the hotel my father inherited. They killed his brother, for whom I am named. The Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia, thirty years after the Munich Accord, was the latest of a series of assaults on the freedom of a country deemed so insignificant that the Western allies considered appeasement the natural solution to its desecration. My father's reaction that day was instinctive; it was the hypocritical, pragmatic, sometimes life-saving reflex of a generation whose ordinary lives were caught up in a maelstrom of competing tyrannical ideologies, the effects of which were for most people uncannily (and murderously) alike.

Josef Škvorecký was born in Náchod in 1924. By the time he left Prague, five months after the Warsaw Pact invasion, he had lived under Nazi rule for six years and Communism for twenty. The horrors of totalitarianism affected him profoundly. They cost him much of what he held dear. Only what he could hold inside himself – a love of words, music, memories and religious imagery – remained. His flight to Canada was inevitable. Škvorecký wrote his first novella at the age of nine – to complete an unfinished trilogy by James Oliver Curwood, about the Canadian North. He fell in love with the Canada of his imagination. It offered freedom – a priceless gift to a writer who knew the possibility of death just for telling the unwanted (and frequently rewritten) truth. Škvorecký is a realist, not nostalgic. His language is his true home.

In 1958, Škvorecký's first novel *The Cowards* appeared in Prague. Because of the political climate, he waited ten years before attempting publication. The book was banned. When it reappeared, during a post-*Ivan Denisovich* thaw in 1964, it sold 100,000 copies. The hero of *The Cowards*, Danny Smiřický, Škvorecký's alter ego, has appeared in a cycle of books, including *The Engineer of Human Souls*, *The Miracle Game* and *When Eve Was Naked*. Taken together, this series of auto-fictions, a mixture of *Dichtung* and *Wahrheit*, represents the most extensive meditation on the impact of totalitarianism on the lives of ordinary people in modern fiction.

The seed of *Ordinary Lives*, which was first published in Prague in 2004 as *Obyejné životy*, was planted decades earlier, in *The Bass Saxophone* (1967) and other works. The novel is orchestrated around the lives of Smiřický's high school graduation class of 1943, and their subsequent reunions, in 1963 and, after the Velvet Revolution, in 1993. Škvorecký abandons a linear narrative in favour of the spiralling form beloved of William Faulkner. Driven by a "torrent of ungovernable thoughts", the novel registers shifts in perspective, changes in society, political dictates, the development of characters over several decades, and we are made aware of the complexity of human relationships, the mutability of truth and the often tragic impact on friendship and families of the palimpsest of history.

Josef Škvorecký, who first learned English as a boy in order to write a love letter to Judy Garland, is an accomplished translator. Faulkner said that to comprehend the world one must understand a place like Mississippi. The same is true of Škvorecký's Kostelec. He learned, from Faulkner, that the interior lives of ordinary people could give rise to complex narratives that reflect the most profound aspects of the human condition. Hemingway inspired him with the idea of prose as architecture, revealing the power of nuance when seemingly insignificant dialogue can have enormous implications. Both writers, like Škvorecký, wrote books which were infused with music and the Bible. *Ordinary Lives* uses these techniques to focus on the universal truths about human nature manifest in characters otherwise lost to history.

Ordinary Lives reveals the horror inherent in life under totalitarianism. Schoolchildren, living in an age when "few people had an idea of the bottomless evil that was Hitler", are trained in Nazi ideology. Some attend a summer camp to improve their German. Ninety per cent of them are Jewish. Ninety per cent end as ash. The terror begins. A German teacher is sent to Dachau, for poor pronunciation of the mother tongue. Seven birth certificates are needed to prove a person's Aryan heritage. A German woman is forced to get pregnant because she has committed *Rassenschande* by marrying a Czech; only a part-Aryan child at the breast can save her from Ravensbrück. Jews beg a priest to baptize them, in a futile effort to avoid the camps. Newly-weds perish in Auschwitz. The skin of a beautiful girl is made into an SS guard's handbag. Eugenics is destiny. A student with a Czech name is classed as *Volksdeutsche*. He ends up at Stalingrad. Wounded, he is afraid to remain in Kostelec, believing that his neighbours will murder him when the war is over. Madeleines and tea do not provoke Proustian memories. Every time Smiřický sees a blowfly, he is reminded of the swarms that descended on his town from the grave where German soldiers were buried, after being beaten to death by partisans.

Central European history is never simple. The "German" soldiers could barely speak German. The "Russian" liberators were Mongolian. A girl he thought was a Nazi is revealed, years later, to have been innocent. Lives are swept up in the machinery of history. Everything is determined by the historical situation. Even language changes – *Lingua Tertii Imperii* is replaced by Communist doublespeak. Under Communism people fare no better. Smiřický barely escapes being sent to a uranium mine when a girl threatens to betray him to the secret police because he has written in a story that her bottom is too big. A priest dies because he refuses to repeat propaganda. An Auschwitz survivor perishes in a Gulag. Working-class origins replace Aryan descent as the criteria of acceptability. The banality of evil is everywhere apparent. A callous indifference to the fate of others is what allows people to survive. There are martyrs and good people but they are rare. Lives can be lost through misunderstanding or on a whim. With time, everything will be forgotten. Untruths pass into history.

Josef Škvorecký's novels are moral and compassionate. They evince a deep love of humanity. They testify to the dangers inherent in simplistic interpretations and the fallibility of human judgement. He believes that it is indecent to condemn the defenceless. Yet Škvorecký claims to be merely a storyteller, not a novelist of ideas, because of a mistrust of imposed interpretations, of ideology; he knows that, in real life, "final solutions lead to the gas chamber". His work, often praised for irony, must be read at a much deeper level. Provoked to modesty by having seen those he loved fall victim to ideas made terrifying reality, grateful for the haven he found, he could not criticize the Canadians and Americans directly for their superficiality – their inability to understand or remember what Europe has been through and the cyclical nature of history. That he needs to append footnotes to his novel, to explain Nuremberg Laws, Prague Spring and Stalingrad is indictment enough.

In 2002, in *Stranger Shores*, J. M. Coetzee published a premature obituary on Škvorecký's literary career, implying he was finished as a writer. An enemy of elitism, more courageous than most novelists, Škvorecký has written in several different styles. If a writer dares more, he will write less uniformly. Faulkner took more risks than Joyce. Škvorecký turned his hand to genre writing in order to survive. He had, for thirty years, to weigh the cost of every word. The price could have been the gallows. Of Škvorecký's more than forty books, many remain untranslated. He has consistently written for a wide readership. He writes in a "minor language", at the mercy of the inadequacy of even the best translation.

Ordinary Lives is a miniature masterpiece by one of our greatest living writers. Profound and moving, it resembles the religious paintings of the Dutch Masters. The implications of its message are universal. In the story of Daniel Smiřický, told over several volumes, we find not a reconstruction of Škvorecký's life and an insignificant little town, but rather an "aleatoric symphony", an allegory of twentieth-century history, the tragedy of entire countries and peoples. To read Škvorecký's work as historical fiction or as an account of a long-lost time is a grave error. He knows that the past is neither dead, nor truly past. It is only forgotten. The same forces which drove his country's tragedy rage on within man. His fight is against the tyranny of ideas and the death of the soul.

Orend, Karl. "When the war is over." The Times Literary Supplement, no. 5529, 20 Mar. 2009, p. 19. The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, link.gale.com%2Fapps%2Fdoc%2FEX1200556501%2FTLSH%3Fu%3Dbritstaff%26sid%3Dbookmark-TLSH. Accessed 11 Dec. 2025.